

New Soviet tests called cloud on arms limitation

By CHARLES W. CORDRY
Washington Bureau of The Sun

Washington—The Soviet Union has begun test-launching long-range cruise missiles from its controversial Backfire bomber in a move that could complicate arms control negotiations and pose new defense problems for the United States, authoritative government sources reported yesterday.

While new intelligence reports were said to state flatly that there have been eight such tests, some defense officials contended that there was a lingering un-

certainty as to whether the Backfire was the launching airplane.

There was no dispute, however, about the missile tests themselves, or that the winged vehicles were launched over distances more than twice as great as were estimated for Soviet cruise missiles as recently as this week in congressional testimony by Harold Brown, Secretary of Defense.

The significance of the Backfire as a launching aircraft is that the Soviets have stubbornly refused to have it included under the numerical ceilings for strategic weapons in the prospective strategic arms limitation treaty (SALT).

They contend it is not a strategic weapon and American negotiators accept that its primary mission may be to attack targets in countries bordering the Soviet Union as well as naval fleets. It is seen as an imposing threat to the U.S. Navy, even without cruise missiles.

American negotiators also argue that the Backfire has the range, especially with its in-flight refueling capability, for strategic missions against the United States.

Against the recommendations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Carter administration is prepared to accept side assurances from Moscow that basing restrictions and production limitations will prevent the Backfire from threatening the United States. The new intelligence reports could complicate matters for negotiators and surely will complicate the administration's problem in winning Senate endorsement of an eventual treaty.

Secretary Brown told the House Armed Services Committee Monday that the Backfire would have to be counted under SALT weapons ceilings if it turned out to be a carrier of long-range air-launched cruise missiles. Long-range in the case of such weapons is defined as more than 600 kilometers (373 miles).

Mr. Brown's comment was in response to a speculative question from Representative Robin L. Beard, Jr. (R., Tenn.) about the Backfire's potential for launching 1,500-kilometer-range cruise missiles. Mr. Brown said, without elaboration, that the Russians "have some new ones under development."

The defense chief's prepared statement said: "Both the Bear [an aging Soviet bomber] and the Backfire can carry air-launched cruise missiles with ranges of about 500 kilometers. As yet, there is no evidence that the Soviets have developed a cruise missile comparable to [America's] although they may be developing a long-range cruise missile of their own design." Some sources suggested that the secretary's statement may already have been overtaken.

According to the intelligence reports, the Russians have launched eight test missiles from Backfire bombers and the average range has been 1,200 kilometers (745 miles). The estimate was that the missiles have fuel capacity to reach farther. The latest test was said to have been within the past two weeks.

Under the emerging U.S.-Soviet SALT treaty, each side would be allowed 2,250 strategic vehicles—land and submarine-based missiles and heavy bombers. No more than 1,320 could carry multiple warheads or air-launched Cruise missiles.

As matters stand now, the Backfire fleet—expected to number 400 planes by 1985—would not be counted under those ceilings, a matter severely criticized by a House Armed Services Committee panel on which Mr. Beard served.

It was Secretary Brown's contention that any arming of the Backfire with long-range cruise missiles would automatically bring the plane under the treaty ceilings. Whether the Russians would agree with that was not discussed.

If they maintained that their missiles

had 600-kilometer range, and remained excluded, considerable problems could arise for the administration. In any case, the emergence of long-range cruise missiles in the Russian air forces—enabling them to fly long ranges and launch missiles toward targets hundreds of miles away—poses new problems in verifying compliance with SALT agreements. What planes carry short-range and what planes carry long-range missiles?

The American missile development has long since handed the Russians that problem. Significantly, they dropped their insistence on range limitations late last year.

Under SALT terms, heavy bombers with cruise missiles are supposed to have what the negotiators term "externally observable differences" from other aircraft of the same type.